JOURNEY REWARDS THROUGH COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY ACTION

We requested this article from Ed Carroll and Vita Gelūnienė, two artists who work in both Lithuania and Ireland, having heard much about their inspiring work with local communities in Dublin and Kaunas. They have chosen to focus on three projects which address the necessity of collective community-led urban development:

- The Cabbage Fields programme, in Šančiai, Kaunas, on a former military site which included cellars used for cabbage storage, leading to a community opera which has been performed in Kaunas, Rotterdam (NL) and Differdange (LUX)
- A community mapping project in Loughlinstown and Ballybrack on the south side of Dublin
- An urban gardening project on the deck of the central Dublin district of Charlemont Square

INTRODUCTION[1]

Our practice with others has involved three sites, each edgy in its own way, spaces nestled within low income communities filled with potential. By engaging with street residents and other local elements it is possible to foster a human-scale approach to urban development. Urbanists, such as Nabeel Hamdi [2], advocate for community participation in urban change, emphasising a necessary shift from individual to collective community action in support of community building.

Our experience reveals that urban planning erodes public land and perpetuates spatial injustice when private interests eclipse community needs. Inequalities present complex challenges and require community expertise.

Below is a visual illustration of each site, beginning with (1) the 19th-century cabbage cellars in Šančiai, Kaunas, Lithuania, a former military barracks complex.

1 Title: Cabbage Field Cellars. Photo: P. Drauss

2) Next is a street-level view of 1970s public housing in Loughlinstown and Ballybrack.

2 Title: Inagh Court, Ballybrack, 2024. Photo: V. Gelūnienė

(3) Lastly, built in 2017, the Charlemont social housing complex in Dublin.

3 Title: ffrench Mullen Deck, 2024. Photo V. Gelūnienė

MOMENTS OF POTENCY

Our approach reclaims public land and seeks new experiences of publicness that foster collective governance. When neighbours transform shared outdoor spaces, they exercise cultural rights and challenge inequalities in urban planning. This citizen stewardship can reveal cultural identities while

ensuring public resources serve public interest.

Šančiai

Since 2014, many collaborators [3] have worked on the Cabbage Field, which had been neglected and used for dumping. The community web site provides extensive documentation about the various projects and activities undertaken since then.

A group of artists and cultural activists engaged local users, collected stories and visions, and explored both the tangible and intangible cultural value of the site. These efforts to reclaim the public space were manifested through artistic actions, outlined below with links, and a set of planning visions presented to Kaunas Municipality.

Year	**Activities with links to creative documentation**
2014-2017	Cycle of arts projects called Friendly Zone #5 #6 #7
2018-2021	Opera process: Libretto, Opera School, and results 2018 2019 2020 and 2021
2022 / 2023	Performances in Differdange (LUX) and Rotterdam (NL)

By 2018, there had been no progress with the Municipality in terms of developing the site even though a real community had built up around its future. It was then that opera emerged as a form to reveal a narrative of the site and of Šančiai's identity. The concept was proposed to various groups, receiving a positive reaction.

Over time, the opera brought together local stories and characters, with community-born musician and Lithuanian National Prize winner Vidmantas Bartulis composing the music for a libretto collaboratively written by local individuals.

Between 2018 and 2023, participation in the opera grew, diminished, then regrouped for outdoor meetings during Covid 19. During this period, we invited both professional and non-professional artists to participate in choir and dance rehearsals for public productions. Choreographer Lina Puodžiukaitė directed international productions, fostering a collective experience for all artists.

4 Title Community opera, Cabbage Field during Balsamic Popular 2019 Photo: D. Petrulis

Title Community opera, Cabbage Field 2019. Vimeo Film A. Liorančas Balzaminė Kalėdų tuopa 2019 on Community opera, Cabbage Field 2019. Film: A. Liorančas Balzaminė Kalėdų tuopa 2019 on Vimeo Film A. Liorančas

3. ***Dublin's Loughlinstown and Ballybrack***

In 2023 the Southside Partnership Creative Places initiative invited the community arts organisation Blue Drum to research how creative practice and public spaces can be improved in Loughlinstown and Ballybrack. In addition, an artist-in-residence helped to seed work with local community groups.

5 Title: Creative Place 'Gather Fest' Research exhibition panels, 2024. Photo: E. Carroll

Research findings showed underutilised public spaces and a network of community centres, though there was a lack of dedicated art spaces. The centres had strong daytime programming but few evening and weekend offerings. A survey of cultural engagement identified the need to renew community spirit and confirmed the potential for creative initiatives in green spaces and programmes focusing on culture, health and environmental renewal.

This year-long research and residency process culminated in a three-day event, Gatherfest, during which the findings were presented through an information exhibition. The exhibition showcased the research results on panels, allowing attendees to engage with the insights visually. Throughout the event, participants had the opportunity to attend informative talks discussing both the research and residency activities, providing a deeper understanding of the implications for the community.

Year	**Activities with links to creative documentation**
2023	Loughlinstown & Ballybrack: Research & Mapping
2024	Small Change Project: Ennel and Inagh Courts: Community Tour
2025	Mapping: Loughlinstown Linear Park and Courts. MapsADD!

6 Title: Loughlinstown, Small Change Tour 2024. Photo. V. Gelūnienė

By early 2024, the research was completed. Through the artists' own initiative, a subsequent effort focused specifically on two streets in Loughlinstown. A Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown County Council Creative Ireland bursary award was used to engage with residents and to map memories and public space activities. This led the artists to produce a walking tour for residents and a community celebration afterwards to mark the life of a recently deceased resident.

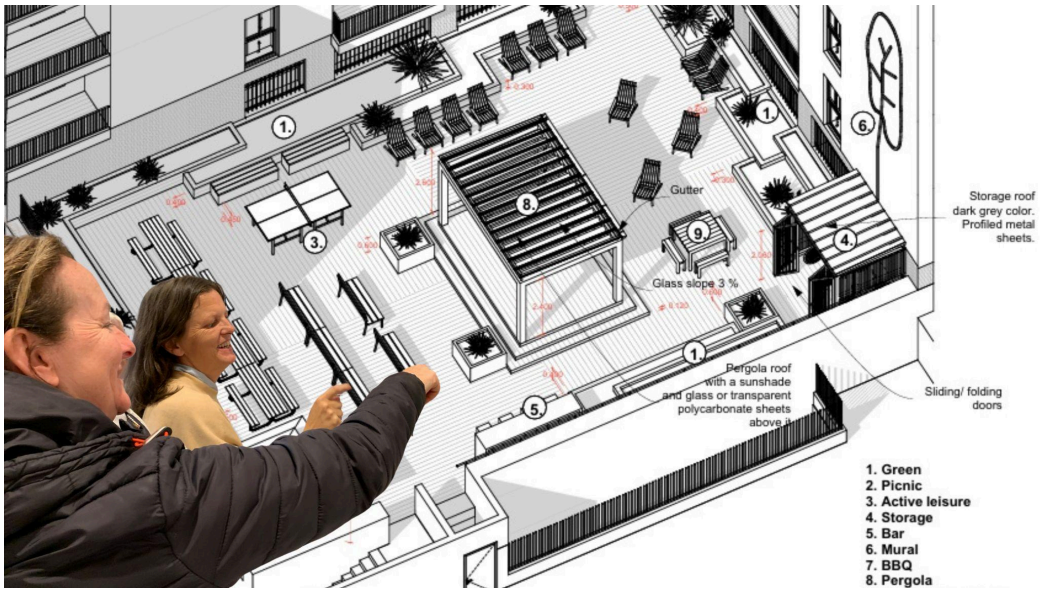
The tour stimulated calls to expand the area under review to six streets that flow into the Loughlinstown Linear Park. In 2025, a short mapping process responded to local Councillors' and residents' call for action. The initiative is being led by us with Loughlinstown Estate Management, and students from Dun Laoghaire Further Education Institute. Workshops and field trips gathered data to map local memories, daily activities in public space and nature. A community trip to other community-led green initiatives took place to gather ideas. Dun Laoghaire Rathdown staff agreed to organise an internal meeting across its departments to have an integrated discussion about plans for the area. The mapping helped identify specific spaces for transformation and energised residents.

Charlemont

Eight years after regeneration, original residents see improved quality in the condition of their housing but less interaction with other residents, while new social housing tenants lack historical connections. The public-private structure has separated tenants—private (majority) and social (one block).

Year	Activities with links to creative documentation
2024	Mapping workshops and designs agreed: Presentation and agreed Design
2025	Creating a community-owned and managed green culture garden

This diverse community faces potential antipathy when it comes to community building. Building Community Building Wellbeing, Charlemont's plan for 2023-2026 identified that arts and culture are critical to the development and expression of identity and belonging.



7 Title: Charlemont Deck Design 2024. Image: E. Carroll, V. Gelūnienė and D. Bručas and Photo: V.Gelūnienė

Blue Drum proposed a design process for an outdoor podium deck (15m x 20m) as a space that could be community-managed and programmable for individual and collective action. Working with residents and

staff, a singular vision was established for the deck as a green culture garden. This hands-on space can work through positive agendas for change among all tenants.

In early 2025, a small group of adults and children began weekly gardening with the support of an artist mentor. Plans continue to achieve visible transformation, culminating in a one-day self-build of a roofed pagoda for outdoor gatherings.

NAVIGATING CULTURAL RIGHTS : THE 2020 ROME CHARTER OF UCLG

The United Cities Local Government Network Rome Charter is helpful in navigating good practice in cultural rights. The Charter, written by François Matarasso, presents five capabilities (following Amartya Sen's work): discovery, creation, enjoyment, protection, and sharing.

Discovery → Creation
Discovery maps existing community dynamics—both energies and tensions—within historical contexts, naturally leading to creation, where residents become collaborators.

8/9 Title: Small Change Walking Tour, 2024. Photos: V. Gelūnienė.

Kaunas created an opera through workshops. Loughlinstown residents conducted mapping sessions, while Charlemont explored fostering a community through community gardening within their deck space.

Creation → Enjoyment

Co-created activities evolve into the enjoyment phase, where communities reclaim public spaces through gathering events and spectacle. Loughlinstown's efforts led to a community street tour, while Charlemont implemented urban gardening workshops. Kaunas' workshops culminated in the winter opera.

10/11 Title: Community opera, Cabbage Field, 2018. Photos: D. Petrulis

Enjoyment → Protection

As communities experience reclaiming spaces, they develop a commitment to protection, whether of unrecognized cultural assets, like Felim McConville's silicon shed in Loughlinstown or through active governance roles. In Kaunas, opera performances strengthened the resolve to register building cellars as a heritage asset despite Municipal opposition.

12 Title Fealim McConville's silicon mask shed, Loughlinstown. Photo: E. Carroll

13 Title: Charlemont mapping workshop 2024. Photo: V. Gelūnienė

Protection → Sharing

Communities that preserve their heritage through cultural practices can share their creative expressions beyond local boundaries. Kaunas demonstrates this through international performances where 40 community members travelled to other translocal communities.

14 Title:ICAF Rotterdam, Community opera, Cabbage Field, 2023. Photo: D. Petrulis
15 Title. Kaunas Biennial, Friendly Zone #6 for Kaunas Biennial, 2015. Photo: R. Ščerbauskas.
Link: Title Friendly Zone #6 Film. A. Liorančas

The Cyclical Nature of the Rome Charter

From our experience these cultural capabilities are central to community building for transformative change. Our experience is that community cultural work is rhythmic—expanding and retracting—responsive to the passing of time, while remaining connected to people, using heritage and art to transform landscapes and, sometimes, to form fleetingly politically coherent communities.

WEWARD: EQUALITY THROUGH SHARED SPACE

Šančiai

The Cabbage Field opera contributed to strengthening local civil society and its defence of public space. Residents, in some cases, are the fifth generation of their family who settled there. The work went beyond simply producing an opera; people discovered how to express their sense of belonging in the process of co-creation. Sharing their experiences with others generated collective energy as residents performed aspects of their own identity. The format of 6-day rehearsals leading to performance created

16 Title: Šančiai community opera singing rehearsal 2018. Director: S. Urbonienė. Photo: D. Petrulis.

its own hardship and enjoyment, and contributed to the wider community desire to protect the spirit of the neighbourhood.

The cello player Saulius Bartulis, recalled: “ The very choice of genre - the "impertinent" idea of choosing an opera genre, and executing it with the strength of the community - was simply a historical moment! “[4]

"You made a choice to make an opera from within the story of the neighbourhood. This is a difficult choice because it's not always possible to keep the quality and authenticity”[5], said Peter van der Hurk, a co-founder of the International Community Arts Festival, Rotterdam..

In December 2024, the community’s efforts led to the official registration of the ‘Cabbage Cellars’ as a cultural heritage site.

Loughlinstown’s Courts

The work engaged 40 residents and five organisations through its community-led approaches, including information leaflets, trust-building meetings, and workshops exploring public space, memory and activity. A walking tour was conducted with 25 participants celebrating the 1970s court architecture, highlighting women's leadership, and honoring community resilience.

Gina Hogan, a volunteer with Estate Management, remarked, “The tour helped us see our place as a cultural heritage. Now with the mapping, residents are able to think about their public spaces - its greens, walkways and park.”[6]

17 Title: Loughlinstown and Charlemont field visit to bee-keeper Anthony Freeman O’Brien, Liberties Community Project 2025. Photo: E. Carroll

The tours prompted local political engagement, with a follow-up meeting resulting in a Council motion and commitment from a senior community officer to conduct further community consultations and community mapping of the Courts and wider park areas.

Importantly, Denis Murray, an environmentalist since the 1980s, noted: "the mapping process has really helped focus and reinvigorate resident action."[7]

No physical change is visible yet, but momentum has generated practical ideas for resident-led action animated by community development centres.

Charlemont

Fiachra O Mathuna, coordinator of the resource centre remarked, “The Green Culture Garden concept and gardening workshops have seeded real community building. We don’t know what will grow but it’s seeded and we look forward to seeing it grow.”[8]

Study visits to experienced gardening communities helped to increase enthusiasm. A one-day self-build of a roofed pagoda will create an outdoor gathering space, serving as both a community building exercise and a way to maintain momentum through manageable changes that can spark resident-led transformation.

18 Title: Roots Gardeners, Charlemont Deck, 2025. E. Carroll

In summary, each context produces its own legacy. Šančia residents nurtured civil society and co-created new cultural heritage. Loughlinstown completed creative mapping, mobilised residents, prompted political engagement, and highlighted social housing heritage. Charlemont’s deck design for a green culture garden sparked energy for environmental action.

Each project demonstrated different approaches to community empowerment and public space activation, with varying degrees of institutional support and resident involvement.

Across all sites residents are the subject not the object.

CONCLUSION: EMERGING INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

The practices shared from Ireland and Lithuania illuminate how community culture can catalyse transformation when it steps over ‘egology’ and prioritises a collective ‘ecology’. Among its features include:

Residents as Agents of Change: Living Heritage as the Catalyst

Our work, cognisant of the Rome Charter, signifies a collective searching for ways in which communities discover their ordinary cultural assets and a co-creation of new expressions. Community culture thrives when residents actively preserve and reimagine local heritage as living. The LoughlinstownBallybrack mapping project demonstrates how bottom-up initiatives amplify resident voices and safeguard social housing heritage. Similarly, the community opera and the tours exemplify how cultural practices can directly confront historical injustices while creating new opportunities for belonging.
These approaches reveal a potentpowerful dynamic: when creative resident expertise combines with artistic creativity, it produces new cultural assets related to its identity and its public space, showing how community-led cultural work provides an essential counterbalance to top-down urban planning.

Working outward from the collective memories e.g. reclaiming public life when the Soviets left, or life in post Soviet Kaunas or public housing in Dublin legitimises local histories that can inform more responsive urban practices.

Collective Action: Repossession of Spatial Justice and Public Value

Enjoyment, understood as 'repossession' of cultural practice, can't just be about consuming culture and entertainment but can evoke a new stewardship that leads to protection of community spaces and assets for the here and now. What is co cocreated is an outward sign of the journey from enjoyment to protection through uncovering deeper connections to their shared spaces.

The activism of Žemuju Šančiai bendruomenė, as analysed by art critic Lina Michelkevičė (2024), highlighted how creative practices directly engage with contested urban issues to effect social change. Their work in the Cabbage Field represents part of a significant repertoire of creative actions that safeguard public interest against competing urban agendas. Though at earlier stages, both Dublin projects show potential for similar sharing of approaches and outcomes.

Spatial justice emerges when communities reclaim and reimagine the public value of shared spaces, forging vital connections between physical environments and social cohesion. These community-led interventions demonstrate that public space is not merely problem-laden physical infrastructure to be managed but an experience of collective identity and publicness.

Ecological Integration: Environmental Consciousness in Community Practice

Community members' active role in shaping their environments continues to face structural obstacles that fail to include residents as "citizen experts." The post-pandemic shift in the perception of public space has accelerated a deeper recognition of the relationship between environmental conditions and community well-being. However, the participation structures are hugely undernourished.

Gardening workshops and environmental art practices in both locations represent more than aesthetic improvements—they embody a movement toward sustainable urban living anchored in collective

ecological awareness. These initiatives, albeit fragile, demonstrate how art and culture can drive environmental sustainability when they build connections for change across communities.

This practice-sharing between Ireland and Lithuania exemplifies how community arts effectively bridge cultural, social, and environmental divides, fostering resilience and transformation in urban neighbourhoods.

As François Matarasso incisively observed, "If people cannot represent themselves culturally, how can they do so in any other way, even politically? If people are only imagined and portrayed by others, how can they be free and equal members of society?"[9][9]

19 Title: Community opera, Cabbage Field, ICAF 2023. Photo: D. Petrulis

Text prepared for the Museum of Unrest

Short biography: Community artists Ed Carroll and Vita Gelūnienė worked in community culture across three locations: Kaunas (2009-2024), Dublin's Charlemont (2017, 2024-2025), and Loughlinstown (2023-2025). Until December 2024, they were members of Žemųjų Šančių bendruomenė, a community association. Since 2014 in Ireland, they have collaborated as part of Blue Drum, a community arts organisation. Their goal is to refresh community culture through collective engagement.

All their practices ojects are co-created with both professional and non-professional artists and organisations. This work depends on their own investment as well as support from Blue Drum,Dublin City Council Arts Office, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown (dlr) Arts Office, dlr Community Section, dlr Creative Ireland bursary, and the Southside Partnership. They explore how collective artistic and cultural action can transform public spaces toward spatial justice and greater equality.

NOTES:

1. Here are links to materials for the practices:
   Gelūnienė, V., & Carroll, E. (2018). "Cabbage Field Case Study." Prepared for United Cities Local Governments, Culture 21 Network.
   Carroll, E. (2021). "Genius Loci - When Imagination of Civil Society confronts Extraction Urbanism" in People, Places and Stories. Castelló: Council of Europe. Published in Spanish and Catalan in "Memoria Viva" by Jaume I University. English version pp. 19-31.
   Gelūnienė, V., & Carroll, E. (2022, December). "We are the artists of our lives." Interview by Kotryna Lingienė for Modernism for the Future series.
   Gelūnienė, V., & Carroll, E. (2023, February). "Šančiai community opera – The Cabbage Field." Interview by Owen Kelly for miaaw.net podcast series [19:15-22:46].
   Gelūnienė, V., & Carroll, E. (2023) 'A Practice of Civil Society: The Sanciai Community Opera 'Cabbage Field" Published by International Community Arts Festival, Rotterdam, pp. 30-42.
   2024 Loughlinstown and Ballybrack Creative Places Research Presentation.
   2024 Loughlinstown and Ballybrack Creative Places Research
   2025 Small Change Report for dlr Creative Places
   2017 Goodbye Tom Kelly Flats. A final goodbye from the residents to their homes.
   2024 Charlemont Deck Design Process with Residents.
2. N. Hamdi (2013) Small Change: About the Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities. Routledge.
3. The following shorts by A. Liorančas illustrate the level of collaboration involved: (i) https://vimeo.com/114437187 (ii) https://vimeo.com/110562819 and (iii) https://vimeo.com/138490085 and (iv) https://vimeo.com/110567382
4. See ICAF (2023) The Sound of Change, p.36
5. op. cit.
6. Gina Hogan in correspondence 2024-09-30
7. Denis Murray in correspondence 2025-02-20
8. Fiachra O'Mathuna in correspondence 2025-02-25
9. F. Matarasso, in his posted review of the community opera, Cabbage Field. Differdance 2022.

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A. Goldbard (2023) In the Camp of Angels of Freedom. What Does It Mean to Be Educated? New Village Press.
F. Matarasso, F. (2019). A Restless Art: How participation won, and why it matters. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Lisbon and London
N. Crowley (2022) Civil Society for Equality and Environmental Sustainability: Reimagining a Force for Change. Dublin: TASC.
L. Dovydaitytė Ceno galimybės ir ribos: projekto Šančiai – draugiška zona atvejis, trans., The possibilities and limits of socially engaged art: the case study of "Šančiai – Friendly Zone" project, in Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis, 74, 125−141.
L. Michelkevičė (2024). "Monografijos 'Kultūros kūrėjai ir urbanistinis protestas Lietuvoje' leidyba." Funded by the Research Council of Lithuania (LMT LT), Contract No: S-LIP-24-20. Implemented by: Vilnius Academy of Arts.